

Message Text

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S E C R E T ROME 1698

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TAGS: PFOR, PINT, VS, VT

SUBJECT: VATICAN PONDERES ITS FUTURE COURSE IN VIETNAM

1. DURING FEB 5 CONVERSATION WITH ILLING, ARCHBISHOP CASAROLI TOOK INITIATIVE TO EXPRESS VATICAN'S ANGUISHED CONCERN OVER PROSPECTS FOR SURVIVAL OF DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH VIETNAM. AFTER LAUNCHING CANDID QUESTIONS "DOES U.S.G. NOW THINK SOUTH VIETNAM CAN MAINTAIN ITSELF AGAINST COMMUNIST ADVERSARIES?", HE MENTIONED THAT IN RECENT CONVERSATION RVN AMBASSADOR NGUYEN VAN HIEU HAD TOLD HIM THAT WITHOUT THE REQUESTED \$300 MILLION OF ADDITIONAL U.S. AID IT WAS VERY DOUBTFUL TO HIM (HIEU) WHETHER RVN COULD MANAGE TO HOLD OUT FOR REMAINDER OF THIS YEAR. CASAROLI THEN RECALLED THAT DURING SECRETARY KISSINGER'S NOV 5, 1974, DISCUSSIONS WITH POPE PAUL, POPE HAD EXPRESSED HIS HOPE THAT U.S. WOULD NOT ABANDON SOUTH VIETNAM. SECRETARY KISSINGER, HE SAID, ASSURED POPE PAUL THAT U.S. ADMINISTRATION WAS COMMITTED TO CONTINUING ASSISTANCE FOR VIETNAM BUT THAT CONGRESSIONAL CONCURRENCE WAS NATURALLY NECESSARY, AND THIS WAS BECOMING INCREASING PROBLEM. ILLING ASSURED CASAROLI THAT THE ADMINISTRATION REMAINED FIRMLY COMMITTED TO CONTINUING OUR ASSISTANCE TO VIETNAM AND FERVENTLY HOPED CONGRESS WOULD AGREE TO LATEST AID REQUEST, WHILE HE COULD NOT ASSESS RVN'S CHANCES FOR CONTINUING RESISTANCE WITHOUT OUR ADDITIONAL AID, ILLING STRESSED THAT IN TWO YEARS SINCE PARIS ACCORDS,

AND DESPITE INCREASING NUMBER OF VIOLATIONS FROM NORTH, SOUTH VIETNAMESE HAD MADE IMPRESSIVE GAINS IN STRENGTHENING THEIR

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DEFENSES AND BOLSTERING THEIR ECONOMY.

2. CASAROLI SAID CHURCH IN VIETNAM AND VATICAN WERE CERTAINLY AWARE OF THE RVN'S FINE PERFORMANCE, BUT THAT REPORTS COMING IN THE LAST FEW MONTHS INDICATE A POSSIBILITY THAT BALANCE MAY BE IRRETRIEVABLY SHIFTING AGAINST DEMOCRATIC FORCES. UNFORTUNATELY, HE SAID, SOUTH VIETNAMESE AND INTERNATIONAL PRESS CAMPAIGN AGAINST PRESIDENT THIEU HAD CAUSED GREAT DAMAGE AND, WHILE IT MAY BE TRUE THAT CORRUPTION PRESENT IN THIEU GOVERNMENT HE IS STILL STRONGEST LEADER ON SCENE AND THAT WITHOUT HIM SITUATION COULD DEFINITELY BE WORSE. CHURCH LOOKS UPON PRESIDENT THIEU AS LEGALLY AND DEMOCRATICALLY CONSTITUTED GOVERNMENT AND FOR THAT REASON FEELS JUSTIFIED IN GIVING HIM ITS SUPPORT.

3. AT END OF CONVERSATION, CASAROLI CONFESSED THAT THE VATICAN NOW HAD TO GIVE SERIOUS CONSIDERATION TO POSSIBILITY OF CHANGING ITS WHOLE APPROACH TO VIETNAM, ESPECIALLY IF CAUSE REALLY APPEARS TO BE LOST. IT WOULD INVOLVE A MASSIVE CHANGE IN THE MISSIONARY POLICY AS WELL.

4. COMMENT: QUITE OBVIOUSLY CASAROLI AND POPE PAUL DEEPLY DISTURBED OVER POSSIBILITY THAT DIE MAY HAVE BEEN CAST AGAINST RVN. SHOULD VATICAN LEADERS MAKE DECISION THAT VIETNAM IS LOST THEY MAY THEN TAKE ACTIONS WHICH UNWITTINGLY WORK TO UNDERMINE RVN'S STABILITY, ESPECIALLY IN REALM OF MORALE. ANY OFFICIAL ASSURANCES WASHINGTON COULD PROVIDE US TO PASS ON TO CASAROLI MAY BE USEFUL IN BLINKING ANY PRECIPITIOUS DECISIONS ON ITS PART WHICH MIGHT TEND TO UNDERMINE OUR EFFORTS IN VIETNAM. DEPARTMENT MAY WISH TO HAVE AMBASSADOR LODGE DISCUSS THIS MATTER FURTHER DURING HIS NEXT VISIT TO ROME. VOLPE

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